Naval War College Review

Volume 52
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 18

1999

Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS

Helene L. Boatner

Elizabeth P. Mclntosh

the healing touch of the doctors, nurses, and corpsmen of the Second World War, there is no forgetting. As one corpsman noted when the brutal fighting at Iwo Jima finally ceased, "One of the things you constantly had on your mind . . . were constantly asking yourself, am I doing the right thing? Am I doing enough for them?" I would guess that the ghosts of a hundred thousand sailors and Marines would answer, "You sure did, Doc, thanks. You did fine. You did plenty." For anyone who really wants to appreciate all that Navy medicine has done, this book is a *must* read.

PIETRO D. MARGHELLA
Lieutenant Commander,
Medical Service Corps, U.S. Navy

McIntosh, Elizabeth P. *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institnte Press, 1998. 320pp. $29.95

If you were a young, adventurous woman who wanted to become part of the action in World War II, you probably could not have done better than join the newly created Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Of course, neither you nor anyone else would have thought of you as a woman—"girl" was the universally accepted descriptor—and you were almost certainly going to end up in a supporting role, doing office work. OSS's founder, General William P. Donovan, could say without drawing criticism that the women were the "invisible apron strings" of the organization. That was the norm in the 1940s. As the war evolved, however, OSS women were sent abroad and became increasingly involved in significant intelligence operations. Even so, from the beginning few women played key roles.

Elizabeth P. McIntosh has written an enlightening and entertaining history that entwines the individual stories of several dozen women in a broader discussion of major OSS activities. She is ideally qualified to do so. After several years as a journalist, she signed on with OSS in January 1943, serving in Washington, India, and China. Then she worked for the Voice of America and on assignment to the Department of State before joining the Central Intelligence Agency, where she was an operations officer from 1958 until her retirement in 1973. McIntosh effectively uses her writing talent and sense of humor to give the reader a serious yer enjoyable discussion of major facets of wartime intelligence.

A few of McIntosh's characters are interesting enough, and had jobs significant enough, to earn extended treatment. Among rhese is Amy Thorpe Pack, who turned her love of adventure, and men, to the service of her country by stealing codes from the Vichy French embassy in Washington, D.C. Another is Virginia Hall, a well-to-do Baltimorean with an artificial leg who spent almost the entire war in occupied France working with resistance teams—first for the British Special Operations Executive and later for the OSS. Gertrude Legendre also gets a chapter to herself. Having been captured while on an unauthorized visit to the front from her office job in Paris, she gained distinction by resisting German interrogation efforts for over six months.

More often, however, McIntosh uses bits of several stories to describe in some detail a major OSS activity, such as research and analysis, or propaganda, or a major overseas headquarters like London, Bern, or Kandy (Ceylon). Some of the women mentioned are known today for other vocations: Julia McWilliams Child ran the OSS registries in Kandy and Chungking before becoming the famous "French Chef," and Marlene Dietrich gladly recorded songs to be broadcast for the purpose of undermining the morale of German soldiers. Some of the women went on to careers in intelligence, with varying degrees of success and satisfaction; most, however, returned to civilian life after the war. McIntosh personally interviewed many of them and questioned others by mail. It is probably unwillingness to waste the efforts of those contributors that leads her to resort occasionally to mere lists, of the "she was present" sort, when there is nothing of particular interest to say. The final chapter of the book conveys some useful information on the roles of women in the CIA today, but it suffers from being based entirely on information and contacts provided by the agency.

Most of the time, however, McIntosh conveys useful lessons about the craft of intelligence while describing the fairly humdrum lives of office workers, translators, and code clerks. In creating a comprehensive intelligence organization from scratch, the OSS developed operating principles that still exist at the CIA, including the value of open-source information, the role of neutral countries in collecting information from both open and clandestine sources, the usefulness of the local knowledge of individuals who have lived and worked in an area of interest, and the value of serial numbers and samples. McIntosh does a nice job of linking OSS intelligence targets in the latter part of the war to postwar political developments. Also, her brief descriptions of post-OSS lives of some of the main characters add a dimension to her stories.

All in all, this book is a useful addition to the rather scant literature on the role of American women in modern intelligence.

HELENE L. BOATNER
Arlington, Virginia

Urwin, Gregory J. W. *Facing Fearful Odds: The Siege of Wake Island*. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998. 727pp. $59.95

In December 1941, Wake Island's garrison of U.S. Marines, augmented by civilians, sailors, and a small Army radio detachment, under the command of Commander Winfield S. Cunningham, a naval aviator, endured repeated bombings and an inept amphibious assault before it was overwhelmed by a second attack supported by carrier planes. Coming on the heels of the Pearl Harbor disaster, the defense of Wake Island inspired the United States and provided it with some of its first heroes.

Gregory J. W. Urwin hooks one's attention early on, setting the tone and focus of the book by describing how Marine corporal Ralph J. Holewinski awaited the Japanese assault on Wake's